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Susan I. Hangen
University of Iowa

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Debating Democracy at the Margins: The Mongol National Organization in East Nepal

Susan I. Hangen
Department of Anthropology
University of Iowa

After the "People's Movement" brought the thirty year long authoritarian Panchayat system to an end in April, 1990, there was an exuberant outburst of political activity in Nepal. One of the various forms of social and political activism that gained momentum at this time was the *janajati* movement, a constellation of organizations and political parties run by and for *janajatis*, the linguistically and culturally diverse ethnic groups, including Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais, Limbus, Magars and Sherpas, who have historically spoken Tibeto-Burman languages. Although many ethnic organizations had been operating during the Panchayat era, after the emergence of the new system and, in particular, the drafting of the 1990 Constitution, these organizations gained a new visibility at the center of Nepal's political landscape. The numerous organizations in the movement share the overarching goals of reviving *janajati* cultures, languages and religions, securing economic and political rights for *janajatis*, and ending centuries of political, economic and cultural domination by high-caste Hindus.

Among the organizations in this movement is the Mongol National Organization, a political party that insists on using the name "Mongols" for the diverse ethnic groups that others call *janajatis*.¹ Above all, the Mongol National Organization (MNO) seeks to gain political power for Mongols and calls for dramatic changes at the state level, including eliminating the monarchy, redefining Nepal as a secular rather than Hindu state, and restructuring Nepal's government as a federal system. Thus, unlike many of the other organizations in the movement that seek to make changes within the present system by acting as pressure groups, the MNO aims for a total overhaul of the political system.

Many Nepalis, including high-caste Hindus and some who could be called *janajatis* or Mongols, perceive the MNO and the other organizations in the *janajati* move-

ment as posing a threat to Nepal's young democracy. If would eventually "break the country into pieces" (*desh tukraunu*), and "turn Nepal into Sri Lanka." This view of ethnic and nationalist political movements as forces that threaten democracy and the overall "security" of states is frequently voiced outside of Nepal as well, by governments and social scientists alike. However, as political scientist Thomas Blom Hansen (1999) argues in his analysis of Hindu nationalism in India, ethnic and nationalist movements can be interpreted as products of democratic systems, and do not necessarily represent the failure of such systems (Hansen, 1999: 5). Hansen reminds us that democracy is more than a set of institutions and procedures, but rather entails the institution of a process of questioning through which people contest and can overturn social hierarchies (Hansen 1999: 8; 18). Despite political instability, the lack of social equality, and the myriad problems that persist in Nepal, a public and open questioning of society and politics has become part of the political system under *prajatantra*. In this paper, I show that the MNO, arguably the most radical organization in the *janajati* movement, works to strengthen this process of questioning that is so crucial to the growth of democracy. While the MNO's stated goal is to make radical changes at the state level, in practice it is one force that has provided a language and a space for rural Nepalis to participate in creating and strengthening democracy.

Since 1990, the MNO has been active in eastern Nepal, and it has gained considerable support at the village level there, particularly in Ilam district. Many of the MNO's supporters, mostly farmers and ex-soldiers, say that they had no interest in politics prior to hearing about the MNO, but now they say they are ready to die for the party. For these people, involvement in the MNO is their first experience expressing themselves politically. A middle aged Rai man in rural Ilam told me, "We Mongols were kept like *singki* and now these days we are starting to get a little air." *Singki*, or fermented radishes, is prepared by burying radishes in a warm hole in the ground that is lined with bamboo sheaths. When the radishes are uncovered and exposed to the air after a month underground, the pungent scent is overwhelmingly powerful. Carrying his metaphor a bit further, people in the MNO are acting and speaking

¹This paper is part of a larger research project on the Mongol National Organization, based on fieldwork conducted from 1993 through 1997. For a detailed discussion of the MNO, its relationship to the *janajati* movement, and the symbolic and historical significance of the term "Mongol," please refer to my dissertation (Hangen 2000).

with such intensity because they have just now finally gotten some air.

When talking about the new political system, one of the things that MNO supporters stress is that *prajatantra* has brought an unprecedented freedom of expression. As people told me countless times, “after *prajatantra* came, we finally gained the right to speak.” This is one of the clearest ways that people throughout Nepal have described *prajatantra*. *Prajatantra* was an opening of the political sphere that created new possibilities for speech: the ban on political parties was lifted, the censorship that had controlled print media officially ended (or at least declined), and numerous organizations seeking to create social change emerged.

The MNO’s ability to act in public without being shut down by the state must be understood as an indication of this new openness. During the twilight of the Panchayat regime in 1988, the MNO’s founder, president Gopal Gurung, was sentenced to three years in jail for openly expressing anti-Hindu, anti-monarchy ideas in his newspaper *New Light*, and his book, *Hidden Facts in Nepali Politics*.² MNO supporters in one village in rural Ilam told me that they had surreptitiously circulated and read a single tattered copy of Gopal Gurung’s book during the Panchayat era, but that they did not dare to utter the word Mongol or talk about Mongol rights in public until after the new political system began.

Aside from the increased freedom of expression under *prajatantra*, MNO supporters in rural Ilam are largely critical of the changes that the new system has brought about. They note that the new system has brought an increase in political conflicts. As the wife of a man who was elected as an MNO candidate to be the VDC chairman in one village in Ilam lamented, “The Panchayat era was much better because there were no conflicts between neighbors and other villagers. Now there are lots of parties and lots of conflicts among them.” Violent conflicts between the MNO and the Communist party in several villages in Ilam erupted after “*prajatantra*” came, and political party affiliation has become a consideration in major activities in village life such as whose wedding to attend. When witnessing the frequent change in governments and the merry-go-round of

²He was arrested under the State Offense Act, which made it illegal for anyone to damage the image of, or attack the royal family, or to disturb the peace of the country in any way. The State Offense Act was first promulgated in the 1880s during the Rana era and defined crimes against the state as crimes against the King, any members of the royal family or the family of the Rana rulers, any attempt to overthrow the Rana government, or any acts of treason (Vaidya 1985: 195-207). This Act was broadly interpreted and frequently invoked to arrest people during the Panchayat era for a variety of activities that criticized the authoritarian Panchayat state.

the same political actors moving in and out of power, many people throughout Nepal have expressed a similar nostalgia for the stability of the Panchayat era — even if it was the product of suppression.

The MNO argues that the current political system is not in fact a “true” democracy. One of the major criticisms of *prajatantra* that MNO supporters voice is that it brought few improvements for Mongols in particular: the new system did not offer policies and structures that would allow Mongols to gain more political and economic power, and the state has not adequately supported efforts to strengthen Mongol cultures, religions, and languages. One MNO activist, Rekha Lawati, summed up this idea, stating that, “Now that *prajatantra* is here, we have the right to speak, but we have no human rights.” People held expectations that *prajatantra* would mean a full equality for all ethnic groups within Nepal, and that the Hindu bias of the state would disappear.

MNO leaders argue that Mongols have not been able to gain full rights under *prajatantra* because of a structural flaw in the new system, a flaw that is evident in the very term *prajatantra*. At a mass meeting held on a hill top in rural Ilam, Kiran Akten, the 30 year old farmer who serves as the MNO General Secretary, gave a speech in which he explained the problems with the term *prajatantra* to a group of villagers. Over the three years of my fieldwork, this became one of the core issues that he addressed in his speeches, teachings to activists, and conversations with people throughout rural Ilam about the MNO. As he told the crowd: “*Prajatantra* means this: the people in a country in which there is a king, used to be called “*raiti*” in the old language, but now they are called *praja*. It’s within the king’s rights to “control,” to “order” those *praja*... *Prajatantra* is the set of teeth that is shown outside, like the tusks of an elephant, and monarchy (*rajtantra*) is sitting comfortably inside.” Kiran went on to argue that it was fruitless to try to gain rights for Mongols, or to establish secularism and federalism in Nepal, as long as *prajatantra* existed — it would be like planting corn and expecting to get rice! What the MNO wants, Kiran lectured the villagers, is to knock down *prajatantra* and to establish *loktantra* — a system in which there is no king, in which people have the power to choose their ruler, and in which secularism and federalism can exist.

Kiran describes *prajatantra* using the familiar Nepali adage about the elephant and its two sets of teeth — the showy tusks on the outside, and the hidden set that elephants actually eat with on the inside. He suggests that *prajatantra* is a trick: people believe they are seeing the real thing, a new political system, while in fact a crucial cornerstone of the old political system remains within this new system. Without making structural changes in the system, particularly by eliminating the monarchy, Mongols will never be

able to gain their rights, he argues. The structural changes that Kiran calls for are directly modeled after India's *lokta* political system, where there is federalism, and a secular state. By distinguishing *prajatantra* from *lokta*, which he offers as a possibility for a fuller democracy, Kiran encourages people to examine the limitations of the new system, and to imagine other possible ways of thinking about the political system.

The MNO also critiques *prajatantra* by pointing to the limited possibilities for political action in the new system. MNO activists proclaim that while the new system is supposed to be a *bahudal* (multi-party) system, it is actually a *bahundal* (Brahman/Bahun party) system. While the Nepali state has allowed the MNO to operate, it has not in fact given the party full freedom to operate as other parties have. According to Nepal's 1990 Constitution, the Election Commission is forbidden from recognizing or registering any political parties that are explicitly formed "on the basis of religion, community, caste, tribe or region" (HMG 1990: Article 112(3)). The MNO is thus technically an illegal party, as the Election Commission has refused to grant it registration on the grounds that it is communal and promotes ethnic divisions. Candidates in parties without registration are at a severe disadvantage because they are not assigned a single and permanent election symbol on ballots, and receive no mention in government controlled media.

However, the MNO persists in running candidates in elections, although they are listed as "independents" on the ballot. Even though the state has denied the MNO the chance to take part in elections as an officially recognized party, the MNO continues to act like a party that has been registered, obeying the state's rules about campaigning and generally following the procedures of the system — even while threatening to stage a revolution if it is not given registration. By operating as if it were an officially registered political party, the MNO places itself in direct confrontation with the state. Gopal Gurung has also further enunciated this confrontation by continually filing cases at the Supreme Court in an attempt to overturn the Election Commission's decision to withhold registration from the MNO.

Despite its marginal status among the numerous political parties of Nepal, the MNO managed to become the third most popular party in Ilam district according to the results of the 1994 parliamentary elections, and it also won 57 out of 517 village government seats in 1991. The MNO has even gained control of two Village Development Committees (or VDCs as the village level governments are called) in Ilam. The party's success at the village level lends them tremendous symbolic capital and legitimizes their place in the political field. However, MNO candidates elected to serve on VDCs can do little to forward the party's agenda,

and thus carry out the business of the VDC in a manner that upholds the status quo.

MNO candidates have won no seats in parliament, and realize that their small, unregistered party has little chance of gaining these seats. Why then do Gopal Gurung and others continue to run in parliamentary elections year after year? One reason is that they seek to publicize the contradictions of *prajatantra*: it is supposed to be a multi-party system, but not all parties are allowed to be full-fledged parties. For MNO activists, the fact that their party has not received registration illustrates the very limited nature of political participation in the new system. We can see the activities of the MNO as serving to test the limits of the new political system by pushing at the places where it is least open. The MNO's very choice to operate as a political party, rather than as a social organization, pushes at the boundaries of the new system. Thus, we can see the party's critiques of *prajatantra* as extending from the realm of discourse into the realm of action.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that we can think of the MNO as speaking not just about Mongols, but as also expressing ideas about the political system as a whole in Nepal. Through speaking about gaining rights for Mongols, the MNO is addressing the issue of how to create a more inclusive political system in Nepal. Activists in the MNO, as well as in other ethnic political organizations, are critiquing the shape of the new political system, and discussing what the political system should look like.

The MNO's critiques of *prajatantra* can be seen as a democratizing force as they draw people into the process of questioning the political structure; that people in rural Nepal are actively engaging with these ideas is evidence that the new system is working, on one level at least. Furthermore, we can see the MNO's critiques of *prajatantra* as inspired by beliefs that democracy would bring about greater equality in Nepal. The MNO is, of course, not the only organization speaking about democracy and working to make Nepal's political system more inclusive. What is noteworthy about the MNO is that the party is effectively and actively engaging a largely rural group of people in this process of questioning.

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